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EDITORIALS

Director Urges Citizens To Take CIA 'On Faith'

ALONG WITH other members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, we listened raptly last week to the assurances of Richard Helms, director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that the job his organization is engaged in doing is essential and is being done "better than it has ever been before."

Contrary to the notion that some Americans may have of the man who operates this cloak-and-dagger outfit, Mr. Helms exhibited no outward signs that his unusual calling had twisted his nature or his objectivity.

While conceding that citizens have to take the CIA more or less "on faith," he insisted that it does not "target on American citizens" and that by far the greater part of its work lies in coordinating information gathered by other agencies and departments of government.

"WE UNDERSTAND as well as anyone the difficulties and the contradictions of conducting foreign intelligence operations on behalf of a free society," he admitted. But he asked that the nation believe, "We, too, are honorable men devoted to her (the nation's) service."

A dark and rather handsome man, Mr. Helms recognizes the ambiguous position which his agency occupies—since it is a secret organization whose personnel, activities, budget and objectives cannot be examined in public.

The prime objective, if what Mr. Helms said is to be taken literally,

to collect information, but not to evaluate it. "We must be strictly objective," he insisted. "We must never take sides."

SOMETIMES THE facts point to dangerous situations or real threats to the nation's safety, but perhaps as often the knowledge contained in CIA files dispel certain possible dangers.

An example occurred during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the director explained. Information reached President Kennedy that the Russians were placing certain types of weapons in caves in Cuba so that they could not be spotted by aerial reconnaissance planes. The CIA was able to deny the stories because it had precise information on the size of the caves in question and knew that it would be impossible for them to accommodate the weapons.

Concerning certain high crimes in which the CIA has sometimes been accused of implication, Mr. Helms was silent. But he emphasized what any thoughtful citizen knows quite well: That the United States is a world power and hence that it may be involved without warning in situations that endanger its security. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that every shred of information bearing on the situation be obtained beforehand—even, as Mr. Helms explained, if it is such a relatively insignificant fact as "the

UNDOUBTEDLY, Director Helms was as candid with his audience (this was one of his very rare public appearances) as he could afford to be. In a world which at times seems to be preoccupied with various methods of eavesdropping, and which has made privacy almost incompatible with prominence, it would be childish to expect the CIA to see anything wrong with any act it found necessary to carry out a high policy decision.

That the act is necessary—even if it triggers such things as political assassinations in other lands—we will, presumably, have to accept on blind faith. We suppose there is no alternative to this kind of trust. On the assumption that everybody else is doing it, we hope Mr. Helms' organization is as efficient as he says it is.